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Montreal's Poets of the Forties

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During the war years Stanley Street was the centre of Montreal's "little bohemia". In the section of Stanley between Sherbrooke and St. Catherine Streets, stood a row of disreputable old tenements. Cheap rooms, blind pigs, private gambling clubs, bookies and numerous other nefarious enterprises thrived here. It used to be said that if you pushed the right buzzer and knew the password you could get anything illegal that you wanted at any time of day or night in that block. Shuttered and draped, the upper windows gave away no secrets. At street level shoe shine parlours, cheap restaurants, Jewish tailors and Chinese laundries crowded together, each blistering with bilingual signs. And up and down the sidewalk, catching soldiers and tourists like flies, strolled the girls, ignoring the complaints of the Y.M.C.A. authorities across the street. Painters and writers were to be found spotted through the tenements, in attics, in basements and in the back rooms of shops. The rent was cheap, the location central, the bookstores, art galleries and universities within walking distance.

This setting provided the backdrop for the activities of the young writers and artists later called the "First Statement Group". The notorious location lent atmosphere to the public image of these writers as "Montreal's Bohemians"; and their talent and poverty, brash youthfulness, vociferous belligerence, their dishevelled personal appearance and irregular living habits gave the description further credibility.

The central figure, if not the leader, of the "First Statement Group" was John Sutherland. John came to Montreal from St. John's, New Brunswick, in 1941 to attend McGill University after a three year bout with tuberculosis. During his illness he had spent much time reading, writing poems, and corresponding with writers and editors of literary magazines both in Canada and abroad. By the time he arrived in Montreal, John was well-acquainted with the Canadian literary scene and with modern American and British poetry. Shortly after arriving, he determined to launch a little

The demise of John Sutherland and the extinction of Northern Review provide a tragic anti-climax to the story of poetry in Montreal in the Forties. One should, perhaps, backtrack, to 1947 to discover the true significance of the movement at its peak. The fact is that the interaction of the two magazines had created a milieu in which good writing was able to thrive. Close communication, diverse views, a variety of talents, sharp criticism, and publishing outlets combined to produce an unprecedented volume of good poetry and gave us, by the Fifties, at least one poet of considerable stature. The emergence of Irving Layton as Canada's most significant, and most controversial, poet, is best understood against this background. The Forties were Layton's formative years. "I was lucky", he says now, "To have known them all - so many exciting personalities, living poetry twenty-four hours a day, thinking, talking, analyzing, arguing, reading and above all writing. I learned something from every one of them."